

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30

DIG: How would the Pharisees and the Torah-teachers view the Lord going into Gentile territory? What was Jesus' point in going to Tyre and interacting with a Canaanite woman after His confrontation with the religious leaders from Jerusalem over the Oral Law? What do we learn about this woman? How did her **reply** show her **faith**? What is the intent of His play on words?

REFLECT: When you deal with needy people or "outsiders" are you more like the apostles or Yeshua? If Christ came to your community, who are the "unclean" He would care for? How might you be His hands and feet for them? Christ walked about a hundred miles to heal this woman's daughter. How has God done that in your life?

This story about the **faith** of a **Canaanite woman** seems to be a natural sequence to the preceding incident showing **Jesus** wiping out the distinction between clean and unclean foods, while here we see **Christ** wiping out the difference between clean and unclean people. **Yeshua** normally had no relationship with **Gentiles** because any association with them made **Jews** ceremonially unclean. But now **Messiah** shows by example that this and other Oral Laws are invalid by deliberately interacting with a **Gentile** woman. Another purpose was to emphasize the eventual mission to **the Goyim (the Gentile nations)**. The kingdom of **God** was not to be limited to **Isra'el**, even though it came to her first.

This is the third time we see **Jesus** ministering to **Gentiles** in the Gospels. **He** set **His** course for the territory to the northwest of **Isra'el** known as the region of **Tyre and Sidon**. This is the same territory that **Elijah** was sent to, which is modern-day Lebanon. **His** intent was to have a private time with **the talmidim**. But it is interesting to note that **Jesus of Nazareth** seldom traveled to **Gentile** areas during **His** lifetime. In fact, **He** rarely had a personal conversation with anyone outside of **His** Jewish community.

This was not a racism or spiritual superiority but, in reality, it is quite fair and logical. After all, the promise of **ADONAI** was given to **Isra'el** starting with **Abraham**, then **Isaac** and then to **Jacob**, so it is only fair that they, people of the promise, should be the first to hear of its fulfillment. Of course, the time will come when this message will go out to all the **Gentile** nations (**Matthew 28:19**). Here **Yeshua** enters a **Gentile** area and ministers to a pagan **Canaanite woman**. This was a general term, meaning **she** was a **Gentile**.⁸³⁹ Nothing could be lower on the Jewish social scale than a **Gentile woman**!

Jesus left that place and went into the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon. The little preposition *eis*, translated into is notable. Our Lord did not merely cross over the border into Phoenician territory, but He went deep into the heart of the country. According to Josephus (Jewish Wars, 3. 1), at the time of the Messiah these two areas stretched from the Mediterranean towards Jordan. It was to these extreme boundaries of the Land that Christ had withdrawn from pharisaic Judaism and its blind obedience to the Oral Law (see **Ei - The Oral Law**). There, our Savior spoke words of healing, and a Canaanite woman would not let the miracle working Rabbi of Isra'el go without an answer.

This scene is quite a contrast to the previous one where Yeshua was in Jewish territory, in Galilee. But now He was entering purely Gentile country, the land of Phoenicia. He had experienced the antagonism of the Jewish leadership, and had failed to get the quiet and rest He needed to minister and teach His apostles. Consequently, He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it. Yet, He could not keep His presence secret and a Canaanite woman, who was Greek and born in Syrian Phoenicia, heard about Him (Mattityahu 15:21; Mark 7:24, 7:25a, 7:26a). The news concerning the great Teacher and Healer had spread far beyond the confines of Isra'el into pagan territory.

Mark says that the woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. Since she obviously was not a Greek by nationality, Greek is probably equivalent here to Gentile (in distinction from being Jewish) or to Greek-speaking. By nationality, the woman was a Syrophenician. In those days Phoenicia belonged administratively to Syria. So Mark probably used Syrian Phoenicia to distinguish this woman from Libyan Phoenicia in North Africa. Jesus' conversation with this woman, therefore, must have been in Greek, not Aramaic. There is no reason why the Nazarene, raised in Galilee, would not have known Greek. In the villages and towns of Palestine, He would ordinarily have used Aramaic. But in the coastal cities of the Greeks, He would have spoken to them in Greek.⁸⁴⁰

But immediately, a Canaanite woman came to Him and fell at His feet and cried out: Lord, Son of David. By addressing Jesus as the Son of David, it seemed that she had knowledge of, and faith in, the claim that He was the Meshiach of Isra'el. She must have also known of the Hebrew Scriptures promise that the blessings of the Lord were not only for the Jewish people, but would ultimately bless many Gentiles as well. ADONAI had said to Abram: I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:1-3). Somehow it seemed that this Canaanite woman believed that moment in history had arrived when she met the miracle-working Rabbi from Galilee.

Her request had a sense of urgency when she cried out: **Have mercy on me! My little daughter is demon-possessed by an impure spirit and suffering terribly (Matthew 15:22; Mark 7:25b)**. The spiritual oppression and demonic activity was certainly stronger and more common in the land of paganism and idolatry. **Job 1** and **Zechariah 3** can testify to the reality of demonic activity and **Adversary Himself**. In fact, his very name in Hebrew means *to oppose*. While the devil and his demons can do great damage to this world and its people, believers in Christ must take hold of the promise that **He who is in you is greater than the Adversary who is in the world (First John 4:4 CJB)**. It was with this understanding that this Gentile mother came to Yeshua ha-Mashiach to plead for spiritual deliverance for her daughter.

She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter (Mark 7:26b). The verb *erotao*, is in the imperfect tense indicating continuous action. She kept on begging. What she was really asking for was a miracle. He was the Messiah and, therefore, she was asking for something that was promised to **Isra'el**, not to the Gentiles. On that basis, Yeshua's first response was rather shocking. He did not answer or say anything to her. So His talmidim having observed the exchange probably assumed that their Rabbi did not have the time or the inclination to address her needs. They came to Him and urged Him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us" (Mattityahu 15:23).

When she kept pressing the issue, Jesus tells her what the real problem was. He reminded the Twelve (and undoubtedly the Canaanite woman) that He was sent only to the **lost sheep of Isra'el (Matthew 15:24)**! Yeshua's personal mission prior to His death and resurrection was only to **the Jews - God's people**. After the Ruach HaKodesh was given, the Gospel would reach the Gentiles even **to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)**, who would be grafted into **Isra'el** through the Messiah (Romans 11:16-24).⁸⁴¹ The situation must have seemed bleak. There was nothing He could do for her. So being desperate to save her daughter, she changed the basis of her plea.

The woman came and knelt before Him. "Lord, help me!" she said (Matthew 15:25). She came to Him on the basis of her own personal need (see En - **Four Drastic Changes in Christ's Ministry**). But Messiah's answer still did not give the mother much hope. In fact, it must have been utterly discouraging. Jesus replied with an analogy: **First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs (Matthew 15:26; Mark 7:27)**. In other words, it was not proper to take what was promised to the Jews and give it to the Gentiles. The word Jesus used was *kunarion*, literally, *to the puppies*. Because they were **the people of the Covenant**, over time the spiritual pride of the Jews grew and grew. Eventually they came to regard the non-Jews as dogs, using the word for dog that would have been translated *wild beasts that roam in packs (Matthew 7:6; Luke 16:21; Second Peter 2:22; Revelation 22:15)*. Even to enter the

house of a **Gentile** was unthinkable because any **Jew** would then be considered defiled. In an interesting twist, however, **Yeshua** used the friendlier term for **dog** that would be used of household pets or *puppies*. His response was still quite shocking, but it emphasized the common understanding of the day that the great treasures given to **Isra'el** were not meant to be desecrated by the pagan **Gentiles**.

And because **she** was a believer and could discern spiritual truth, **she** understood the lesson **He** intended to teach. **Her** reply was remarkable. **She** humbly agreed with **Jesus'** statement and replied: **Yes, Lord, but even the puppies eat the children's crumbs that fall from their master's table (Matthew 15:27; Mark 7:28)**. And **Jesus** loved **her**. Here was a sunny **faith** that would not take no for an answer; here was a **woman** with the tragedy of a **demon-possessed daughter** at home, yet there was still light enough in **her** heart to answer with a little smile.⁸⁴² The household *puppies* were part of the family and loved by **the children**. The bottom line was that **she** was not asking for that which was promised to **the Jews**, only that which was extended to **the Gentiles**.

The woman had taken the place of a **Gentile**, and had, so to speak, accepted the second place in line. **Jesus** was pleased with **her** reply. On that basis, then, **He** was free to minister to **her** and granted **her appeal**. Then **Jesus** said to **her**: **Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted. You may go; the demon has left your daughter**. The perfect tense is used, showing that it was a permanent cure. **And her daughter was healed at that moment**. Indeed, **she went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon was gone (Mattityahu 15:28; Mark 7:29-30)**.

The whole situation gives us a great picture of first-century Jewish culture. In light of the fact that **the Jews** are **the people of the Covenant**, it was understandable. It was not time for the Gospel to be declared to the **Gentile** nations. **Because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile (Romans 1:16)**. This situation was very consistent with traditional rabbinic view dealing with **Gentiles** who were seeking after **ADONAI**. While the door has always been open for any **Gentile** to connect with **Isra'el** and their **God**, the rabbis did not make it very easy.

Out of fear of insincere converts or pagan cultural influences, it was specified that **the Gentiles** needed to clearly prove **their** commitment. The most pessimistic view stated that **the proselytes are as hard for Isra'el to endure as a sore (Tractate Yevamot 47b)**. **The rabbis teach that even the sin of the Golden Calf in the wilderness is to be blamed on the converts from Egyptian paganism (Exodus Rabba 42:6)**.

Because of these suspicions, it was understood that if a **Gentile** seeker approached a rabbi, the rabbi was obligated to initially reject the person. In a most interesting parallel to

this account seen here, **the Talmud notes that some key questions should be posed to a potential convert, like "What is your objective," and "Do you know that today the people of Israel are in constant suffering."** If the seeker says, "I know of this and I do not have the merit," then that seeker is to be accepted immediately and taught some of the precepts of the Torah (Tractate Yevamot 47a).

In this context, **Christ's** encounter with this **Gentile woman** reflected the very natural reply of a first-century rabbi to a seeker of **the God of Isra'el**. Without a doubt, **the Lord** rather harshly rejected **the Canaanite woman** three different times - not answering at all, then saying **His** calling was only to **the Jews**, and finally saying **He** could not share the bread with a **Gentile**. It is the commonly held tradition, along with the grace of **Yeshua**, which resulted in the acceptance of that **woman** as a new disciple and the healing of **her daughter**. This should serve as a beautiful reminder to all **Gentile** believers that they are grafted into **Messiah** by **faith**.

This was an important lesson for **the Twelve** to learn in view of the ministry that would be entrusted to **them** in the days following **Christ's** death and resurrection.

Rabbi Sha'ul says to us even today: **To those of you who are Gentiles I say this: since I myself am an emissary sent to the Gentiles, I make known the importance of my work in the hope that somehow I may provoke some of my own people to jealousy and save some of them! For if their casting Yeshua aside means reconciliation for the world, what will their accepting him mean? It will be life from the dead! Now if the hallah offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole loaf. And if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you - a wild olive - were grafted in among them and have become equal sharers in the rich root of the olive tree (Romans 11:13-17 CJB).**